



Ratites (Emu, Ostrich, and Rhea)

Red meat is now on the “wing” into innovative restaurants and some meat markets. The latest in meat products is from the “ratite” family of flightless birds. It’s lean and tastes like beef, but contains much less fat. In fact, ratite meat is even lower in calories than chicken and turkey. Ratites have been around for 80 million years. Here’s some information on the newest meat source in America.

What are Ratites?

Ratites (“RAT-tights”) are a family of flightless birds with small wings and flat breastbones. Ostrich, emu (“E-mew”) and rhea (“REE-ah”) are members of this family. Ostrich is native to Africa; emu, to Australia; and rhea, to South America — particularly the grasslands of Argentina. When fully grown, ostriches — the largest birds in the world — stand about seven to eight-feet tall and can weigh 300 to 400 pounds; emu are about six feet tall and weigh 125 to 140 pounds. Adult rheas are about five feet tall and weigh 60 to 100 pounds. The birds are 95-percent usable as meat, feathers, oil and leather.

How are Ratites Raised?

Newly hatched chicks usually weigh about two pounds and are about 10 inches tall. Young ratites must be sheltered in a warm place for their first weeks of life. Adolescent and adult birds are allowed to roam freely in fenced pastures or pens. Ratites need daily exercise to avoid leg and digestive problems.

The closely woven wire fences must be 6 to 8-feet high because ratites can leap over a 5-foot fence. Ratites are fed on grain supplemented by pasture. Ostrich was the first ratite to be raised in the U.S. There are now about 1,000 ostrich growers in the U.S. raising about 100,000 birds. Emu are now raised in at least 43 states by about 10,000 families (3,000 are in Texas). The emu population is about a million. Rheas are the newest U.S. farm-raised ratite, but at over 15,000 birds, are the largest population of farmed rheas.

Are Ratites USDA Inspected?

Yes. Effective April 22, 2002, ratites are under mandatory USDA inspection. Establishments that slaughter ratites are required to implement and validate sanitation standard operating procedures and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems, as required by mandatory poultry inspection regulations. Previously, voluntary inspection was available for ostrich beginning in December 1991. Ratites are slaughtered at about 10 to 13 months of age.

Retail Cuts of Fresh Ratites

Ratite meat is sold as steaks, fillet, medallions (small coin-shaped pieces of meat), roasts and ground meat. The most tender meat comes from the thigh or “fan”; meat also comes from the drum and forequarter.

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Are Ratites “Red” or “White” Meat?

Although ratites are poultry, the pH of their flesh is similar to beef. Therefore, they are classified as “red” meat. The raw meat is a very dark cherry red. After cooking, the meat looks like beef and the flavor is similar but a little sweeter.

What Cooking Methods Can Be Used?

The tenderness and texture of farmed ratite meat lends itself to light grilling, pan frying or roasting. However, because ratite meat is so low in fat, care must be taken not to overcook it.

Since ratites are classified as red meats, steaks and roasts can be safely cooked to medium rare (145 °F) or to medium (160 °F); ground meat should be cooked to 160 °F.

What is the Cost Per Pound?

At this time, emu, ostrich and rhea meat are specialty items available in restaurants and some stores. The meat is more expensive than beef, pork, chicken and turkey. However, the price will become more reasonable as the quantity of this meat becomes more widely available.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7.



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